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ABSTRACT

A metacritical judging model for contest oral interpretation that evaluates the performer's critical decisions is designed to meet three criteria: (1) it attempts to incorporate the advances of oral interpretation scholars outside the forensics community with the activity at forensics tournaments, (2) it recognizes that forensics competition is fundamentally a pedagogical activity, and (3) it recognizes that a forensic tournament is different from a public performance and calls for appropriately different behavior. To evaluate the fit between the literature, the performance, and the performer's critical judgment, the metacritical judge must view the interpretation as an argument. The judge evaluates both the introduction and the performance to determine whether claim, literature, and performance all support each other. The metacritic must also evaluate the worth of the introductory claim to determine if the critical thinking behind the performance is really interpretation or merely description. The most important implication for the metacritical model is the increased importance of the introduction to the judge's decision. Other implications include a call for interpretation-specific criticism from the judges rather than performance-specific criticism, a potentially greater depth for the performers, and interpreters' recognition of the rhetoricity inherent in poetics. (HTH)

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THE JUDGE AS METACRITIC:

A MODEL FOR JUDGING INTERPRETATION EVENTS

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THE JUDGE AS METACRITIC

INTRODUCTION

Oral interpretation of literature is an art requiring critical decisions from inception to the final performance.[1] A critical decision is made when the performer decides a particular piece of literature is worthy of presentation and suitable for the particular audience for whom it will be performed. Critical decisions are made when the performer analyzes the literature to determine the author's intent and to discover the relationship between the style and the meaning. Critical decisions are made when the performer adapts the written material for performance, choosing which parts are necessary and which are suitably omitted. Finally, critical decisions are made when the performer makes performance choices; deciding how to best use voice and body to communicate "to an audience a work of literary art in its intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic entirety."[2]

When oral interpretation is performed as a Forensic event the critical decisions leading up to the final product are too often ignored as a means for reaching a decision. Thomas Colley's observation, commenting on his experiences judging Forensics tournaments, identifies what seems to be the predominate judging model. He said, "Judging was reduced to a matter of technique, degree of slickness."[3] Many of us who have judged oral interpretation at Forensics contests share his "feeling of having heard a series of contrived readings. The aim of the readers seems to be to display facility."[4]

When both the contestants and the judges focus their attention so predominately on <u>the show</u>, oral interpretation as a Forensics activity suffers, the field of oral interpretation suffers, and the discipline of

speech communication suffers. The activity suffers because when the rewards of participation are perceived to result primarily from vocal facility even our best students quickly make such facility their goal. The critical choices are then made on the basis of what will make for the best show, not what will make the best oral interpretation. (Of course, some of our best students do not make oral facility their goal. They conclude, instead, that Forensics is a trivial activity and prefer to devote their talents elsewhere. Many of our outstanding colleagues in Oral Interpretation have, unfortunately, drawn the same conclusion.) The field of oral interpretation suffers because many students equate Forensics contest interpretation with "good interpretation." If their only examples concentrate on slick delivery then slick delivery will be their definition of good oral interpretation although no serious student of oral interpretation would agree to such a definition. The discipline of speech communication suffers because the judging model for oral interpretation as it has evolved is clearly a descendant of the elocutionary school of rhetoric. Too many of our colleagues in other disciplines still believe we teach merely gestures and inflection; our credentials suffer when we promote an activity that rewards such elocutionary training.

Our friends teaching oral interpretation make no secret of their distaste for the Forensic style of oral interpretation and the traditional solution to the problems associated with Forensics is the festival format. The argument is that competition breeds the warped view of oral interpretation and if we remove the competitive trappings of the activity then we can promote better oral interpretation. While there are merits to the use of festivals there are also merits to contests and rather than leave

the rewards of contest participation to debaters and orators our task is to develop a judging model that promotes more worthwhile goals.

STANDARDS FOR THE MODEL

The metacritical model for judging contest oral interpretation is designed to meet the following three criteria:

1. It attempts to incorporate the advances of scholars in the field of oral interpretation outside of the Forensics community with the activity at Forensics tournaments. Forensics is an activity with the potential of applying the findings of the various fields of speech communication both as an educational tool and as a research laboratory. While many of us in Forensics make modest contributions to the discipline as a whole we also must borrow the results of the work of those outside of Forensics. Most of us do not have the time to put into research that our colleagues in interpretation studies are able but we can read what they publish, attend their programs at conventions, talk to them, invite them to help our students prepare for contests, and adapt our activity to their scholarship. While they have much to offer us and our students we cannot benefit from them unless our judging standards reward performances consistent with their scholarship.

   The metacritical model attempts to break with Forensics tradition whereby a general style is encouraged because that is what has always been done while other styles of literature and performance are discouraged because they have not been done in the

past. This model is an attempt to promote diversity in Forensic oral interpretation.

2. It recognizes that Forensics competition is fundamentally a pedagogic activity. However rewarding we find winning trophies at a tournament the reason we prepare students to compete is for their educational growth. A judging model that is designed to test our students' performance skills and intellectual functioning is superior to a model that tests only the performance skills. I do not mean to suggest that our students do not analyze their literature. I do mean to suggest that whatever analysis they do is neither critically examined nor explicitly rewarded as part of the contest. Unless the contest rewards are based, in part, on the critical analysis we cannot claim to be fulfilling the educational promise of Forensics.
3. It recognizes that a Forensics tournament is different from a public performance and calls for somewhat different behavior. The audience for a public performance of oral interpretation is not called upon to make comparative evaluations of the performers nor to provide criticism designed to improve future performances. The Forensics judge is required to do both. I shall suggest later that such differences in context call for differences in performance between Forensics contests and public performances of oral interpretation. Those differences are not in the performance of the literature, however, but in the wording of the introduction.

THE METACRITIC

As discussed above, the oral interpreter must make critical choices when preparing the performance and the metacritical model is based on the premise that a proper role of the oral interpreter is that of a critical thinker. The result of that critical thinking is made apparent during the performance and, if successful, the audience shares common meaning with the interpreter and the author. The proper role of the judge of oral interpretation in Forensic contests is to be a metacritic; a critic of that interpreter's critical thinking.

In order to perform the role of the metacritic the judge must evaluate the fit between the literature, the performance, and the performer's critical judgements. To accomplish that the Forensics interpretation may be viewed as an argument. During the introduction the interpreter makes a critical claim about the literature and supports that claim through the performance of the literature. The judge evaluates both the introduction and the performance to determine if (a) the literature supports the claim, (b) the performance supports the claim, and (c) the literature supports the performance. The literature would support the claim if the written text provided sufficient grounds for accepting what was said in the introduction. The performance would support the claim if the behavioral choices of the interpreter provided sufficient grounds to accept the introduction. The literature supports the performance if the text legitimately called for the interpreter to behave as he/she does when presenting the literature. The superior performance will meet all three requirements.

The metacritic would also evaluate the worth of the claim made in the introduction to determine if the thinking behind the performance is really

interpretation or merely description. Interpretive claims are those that explain why the literature is particularly noteworthy; they critically examine the writers style, or thoughts, or ability to capture universal themes in a unique manner. Interpretive claims may explain what the literature has to say about people, about life, or about particular universal events. There is a wide range of choices for worthwhile claims which could be used in an introduction. A contestant could, for example, argue why a work is unique, how it is universal, or what it suggests.[5] The work could be defended as articulating a particular philosophy in a work of fiction. The nuances of a literary school of thought could be illuminated. Classic works could be used as means to provide insights to contemporary conditions. An alternative to making a claim in the introduction about the literature is to make a claim about some aspect of life and use the literature as support for that claim. In such a case the contestant will use the literature to demonstrate what the contestant wished to say rather than use the introduction to illuminate what the author did. Either choice would be critically valid. There are probably other types of interpretive claims and they would all share the quality of delving beneath the surface of the literature to show an appreciation beyond the superficial and to help the listener better understand the material.

Descriptive claims, on the other hand, are more superficial. They are often merely plot summaries; sometimes as simple as a description of the action that will take place in "the following selection." Descriptive claims neither demonstrate appreciation for the subtleties of the literature nor help the listener understand it any better than if he/she were to read it quickly. There are also times when the introduction presents no claim at

all; such as when the introduction consists of rhetorical questions of the "what if" variety and the judge is expected to figure out what the author's answer is, or if the author really meant to answer that question at all. The lack of a claim would be, for the metacritic, of even less value than would be descriptive claims.

When using the metacritical model the judge's response to the interpretation must be related to the contestant's critical judgements. The judge asks such questions as: Were the performance choices justified by the literature? Is the contestant's claim justified by the literature? The metacritic judges the performance in light of the interpretation and the performance rather than only the performance alone.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE MODEL

THE INTRODUCTION. Perhaps the most important implication of the metacritical model in Forensics competition is the increased importance of the introduction to the judge's decision. In current practice the introduction is often not distinguishable from the literature, presumably because that is what judges seem to like. With the exception of setting the scene or introducing the characters the introduction, as currently presented, is usually unnecessary to the appreciation of the performance or the literature. An introduction is expected, though, so all contestants who want to do well dutifully present one.

For the metacritic the introduction must be used to present the claim(s) about the literature; to explain the performer's critical judgements. The introduction creates the basis for the decision by both telling the judge what to listen for and by establishing why the literature

was used. After hearing the introduction the judge may then listen for how well the literature and performance support the claim. In the process of making the claim about the literature the performer is explaining why the literature is something worthwhile for an interpreter to use.[6]

The importance of the introduction is also of practical value to the Forensic interpreter. No judge can fairly evaluate what a performer is attempting without knowing what the performer is attempting. By asking the contestant to articulate the claim in the introduction the judge can fairly evaluate if the performer failed or succeeded. Currently, if a judge wants to evaluate such success, he/she is forced to either assume the contestant's interpretation matches the judge's, guess what the interpreter is trying to accomplish, or infer the intent after most of the performance is over. Well made claims in the introduction can make the judging process more fair for every contestant.

Developing the introduction as a claim can also serve to overcome the judge's ignorance of, or bias towards, particular literature. No judge is familiar with all the literature possible to use in contests and that lack of familiarity may result in bias towards some literature or to misperceptions of the literature. Familiarity may also lead to bias or a limited perception of a work. For instance, a critic who has encountered a piece of literature performed in the past may have a restricted notion of how it should be interpreted or may believe it is not worth performing. Or, perhaps on a first encounter the critic may not realize the work's quality. An introduction that serves as a claim would call on the metacritic to think of the literature in terms of what is claimed at that time, calling for the judge to keep an open mind to discover if the claim is justified. This may

result in an interpretation that is very different from that which the judge would have or would originally think possible, but an interpretation that is, nonetheless, valid .

Well developed claims in the introduction might also lead to the use of more unusual literature in contests. As Colley says, much of what is heard at contests sounds very much alike. That is due in part to similarities in delivery styles but also in part to using very similar literature. When all contestants are required to defend their choices of literature, and when judges listen to those defenses with an open mind, students will be more free to explore unusual forms. The metacritical model does not suggest that anything should be accepted just because it is different but it does allow for critical examination of unusual literature.

Almost all literature used in college tournaments is dramatic in form. Prose is chosen because one character is delivering a monologue or two (or more) characters are engaged in dialogue, and much of the poetry that is interpreted is either a dramatic monologue or dialogue. Most of what we see at contests is also modern literature; the test of what is new for contest use seems to be the date of publication. Such practices leave a wealth of literature unexplored. Our students and our activity would benefit from exposure to folk literature and classic literature, to descriptive literature, to impressionist and expressionist and surrealist and absurdist literature. When the introduction is developed as a claim the judge does not have to be an expert in all forms of literature; he/she can rely on his/her ability to listen to claims, listen to support, and evaluate according to what is said and done.

An example of an introduction that made a critical claim was provided during the 1982-83 Forensics season by Kelly Swenson when she introduced her prose interpretation saying,

> A reader of horror fiction has to first be able to believe in the characters in order to later believe in the rather extraordinary circumstances those characters will be placed in. Therefore, one of the skills an author of this genre must possess is the ability to make his or her characters believable. Stephen King, a rather well-known author, fortunately, has the ability to give the reader credible characters, such as two characters found in a rather painful and delicate scenario in "Cujo" by Stephen King.

While the introduction was not developed with the metacritical model in mind it did anticipate the perspective. By stating the critical claim (King's ability to create credible characters which horror fiction writers must do) she asks the judge to base a decision on her support for the claim (her ability to suggest believable characters).

CRITICISM. The second implication of the metacritical model is it calls for interpretation-specific criticism by the judges. The comments on the ballots should all relate to what was attempted by the contestant, not what the judge thought should be attempted. Such comments would include statements about the clarity of the claim, the support for the claim, the success of the attempt, the validity of the performance choices, etc. Such comments would be more meaningful because they respond to what the performer tried to accomplish.

Conversely, comments that are not specific to what was attempted become meaningless. For instance, ballots that just have "git" or "jist" written on them respond to neither the worth of the literature nor the attempts of the interpreter. The metacritical model calls for the judge to think about and explain why "git" and "jist" are inappropriate performance choices; sometimes they are and sometimes they are not. The metacritic would also be

called on to explain the meaning of comments such as, "This piece is over used." Such comments should explain how frequency of use relates to the reasons the performer chose the piece and to the validity of the interpretation. For the metacritic all comments must relate to the contestant's interpretation.

INTELLECTUAL RIGOR. The third implication of the metacritical model is that it could lead to greater intellectual depth by the performers. Forensic contestants do not presently need to express the thoughts that are behind their performances but the metacritical perspective demands that they explain at least some of their thinking. Since one of the beliefs of our discipline is that ideas are clarified and tested when they are communicated the educational value of the metacritical model should be clear.

The presentation of the contestants' thoughts may also lead to the use of higher quality literature at tournaments. Currently, since the contestant only has to perform the piece the burden of defending the worth, or objecting to the lack of it, falls on the judge. If poor literature is used the judge is forced to explain why it should not be used. If contestants must support the merits of their literature in order to achieve the rewards of participation they are more likely to choose defensible material. While many of our students do choose high quality literature many do not and will not until they are asked to explain what makes their piece worthwhile, and until that explanation becomes part of the basis on which they are judged.

RHETORICITY OF LITERATURE. Another implication of the use of the metacritical judging model is, through the adjustment to the model's

standards, our oral interpreters will begin to recognize the rhetoricity inherent in poetics. As Hellmut Geissner[7] and others[8] argue works of literature are intended to influence others rhetorically. The judging model that fails to ask performers to discuss the meaning of the literature, that focuses attention solely on the performance without investigating the thoughts that influenced the creation of the literature and the performance, is bound to ignore the rhetoricity of the literature and the rhetorical possibilities of the performance. Since Forensics is housed in departments devoted to the study of the meaning of communication and the effect of behavior on that meaning it seems reasonable to expect that meaning and intended influence are suitable for investigation in all Forensics events.

DISCLAIMERS

The metacritical model is certainly open to interpretation and misinterpretation, as is any judging model. I will now discuss three objections to the model that might result from misinterpretation.

First, the metacritical model is <u>not</u> intended to make oral interpretation of literature sound like debate or persuasive speaking. The claims and evidence discussed above do not come in the form of quotations, statistics, or empirical studies. The evidence is in the literature and in the performance. If the performance substantiates what is claimed in the introduction, and if the claim in the introduction is supported by the literature, then the argument is made in a manner relevant to the forum in which it is presented.

Second, the metacritical model is not intended to eschew the traditional basis of oral interpretation by focusing attention in a way that is different from the requirements of a public performance. Just the opposite is intended. The metacritical model is intended to promote performances that are not easily identifiable as "Forensics" interpretations by changing the traditional basis of decisions, encourage the use of different literature, and promote standards that encourage analysis of the material. There are, however, substantive differences between oral interpretation for a public performance and oral interpretation for a Forensics tournament. The Forensics judge is there as a teacher while the public audience is not and the performers in a Forensics contest will be ranked in relation to their competitors while the public performer will not. Neither the teaching nor the ranking in the contest should be done without knowing what the contestant intended. This does not mean that public performers do not or cannot introduce their material in a manner that would fit the metacritical perspective but the Forensics contestant should be obliged to do so while the public performer may do so as an artistic choice.

Finally, the metacritical model does not favor sloppy performances over well prepared performances. There is nothing inherently wrong with a polished performance but in current practice it appears that a high gloss is the primary standard to strive for. This model advocates that the slickness of the performance should match the literature and the intent as developed in the introduction and exemplified in the literature. If, for example, the literature is noteworthy because it captures natural conversation then a perfectly smooth delivery is out of place since natural conversation is characterized by hesitations, false starts, etc. If the literature is said to exemplify the superficiality of relationships then the slick delivery

could be very appropriate. The point is the judge should make the decision based on how well the performance fits the intent of both the author and the performer. The judge should not simply accept that any performance choices are either correct because everyone else has chosen them nor incorrect because no one else has chosen them.

CONCLUSION

While the oral interpretation practiced at Forensics tournaments may well be the best it can be using the current judging model it can certainly be improved. The students engaged in the activity, particularly the best of those in the activity, are clearly capable of doing better than they now do if it would result in favorable decisions. The current decision model has evolved with no apparent discussion of why it has taken the form it has nor the effect that form has on the activity. Nevertheless that model coaxes students to perform to it's standards.

The metacritical model for judging oral interpretation calls for the interpreters to clarify what they are trying to accomplish in their performances so the judge can base a decision on how well that intent is fulfilled. As a metacritic the judge can be both more helpful to the interpreter-as-student and more fair to the interpreter-as-contestant.

NOTES

[1] Oral interpretation textbooks and oral interpretation studies both focus far more attention on the analysis of literature than the performance of the literature. This is not to say the performance is unimportant but that the performance is dependent on the analysis.

[2] Charlotte Lee and Frank Galati, Oral Interpretation (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), p. 3.

[3] Thomas Colley, "Oral Interpretation in Forensics," National Forensic Journal 1:1 (Spring 1983), p. 44.

[4] Colley, p. 45.

[5] See Lee and Galati, p. 8-10.

[6] Some may say that any literature is worth using. Even if I were to agree with such a position-- which I do not -- the point here is that our purpose is to encourage the contestant to think about why the literature is worthwhile. Thus, even if the contestant performs literature that is universally acclaimed, the work's unique worth, in the mind of the contestant, should still be communicated to, and evaluated by, the judge.

[7] Hellmut Giessner, "On Rhetoricity and Literarity," Communication Education 32:3 (July 1983), p. 275-284.

[8] Michael Osborn, "The Rhetoric of Theatre," Unpublished paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, November 5, 1982. Elizabeth P. Lance, "Report on the 8th International Colloquium on Communication: The Relations Between Rhetoric and Oral Interpretation,"

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